

Linguists and teachers collaborating in an ELA classroom: Teaching around the test

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Abstract. In this paper, a scholar of English Education (Michelle) and a linguist (Chris) discuss their four-week research study in a ninth-grade classroom. Highlighting the collaborations with the classroom teachers, this paper discusses the importance of integrating linguistic concepts with current curricular demands. A focus on the final activity, in which students were asked to explore how linguistic concepts relate to areas of the everyday world like social media and the law, demonstrates that students were able to engage with the linguistic concepts in critical and important ways. The paper finishes with a discussion of how linguists can consider future collaborations with stakeholders in K12 spaces, and the importance of integrating these concepts into the existing curriculum.

Keywords. linguistics; English language arts; curriculum; secondary education

1. Introduction. Linguists need teachers. And many teachers can benefit from working with linguists. These were two of the many valuable takeaways from the "Collaborative Efforts in Linguistics: Partnerships Between and Among Secondary and Higher Education Institutions" session at LSA's 2024 annual meeting. Sponsored by the Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee (LiSC), this discussion on K12 teacher and linguist collaboration reflects a larger body of recent scholarship that argues for the need to integrate linguistic concepts into secondary school curricula, provides models for doing so, and discusses the challenges and limitations of these efforts (e.g., Denham & Lobeck 2005; Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2014; Reaser et al. 2017; Plackowski 2020; Devereaux et al. 2021).

Collaboration in these efforts is, in fact, a central theme in our 2019 collection, *Teaching Language Variation in the Classroom: Strategies and Models from Teachers and Linguists*. The volume features a range of examples of curriculum development between different sorts of linguist-teacher collaborators, including the following:

- a math teacher working with linguistics professors to develop a high school linguistics elective (Bergdahl 2019)
- a composition scholar working with an English teacher to develop assignments using digital media to teach language variation (Sladek & Lane 2019)
- an English education researcher working with a high school teacher to examine language ideologies in classroom talk and lesson-planning, with particular consideration for African American students and other students of color (Marshall & Seawood 2019)

One of the major lessons we learned from developing this collection, and from working with preservice and inservice teachers over the years, is that linguistics content cannot be effectively integrated into a secondary school curriculum if we are simply aiming to add more material. We

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have argued that we must adopt an *integrative approach* rather than an *additive* one for such collaborations to be successful:

Teachers face pressures and parameters that structure each day in their classrooms, from students to parents to administrators to districts. So often, they are asked to include "just this one more thing" in an already full curriculum. Teachers and linguists must *integrate* instruction related to language variation and ideologies rather than simply *adding* more material to be taught.

(2019: xxi)

While this advice was initially offered for teaching the topic of language variation, we believe it applies to instruction on all linguistic content. A major hurdle, of course, is that linguistics is not typically given many dedicated spots within existing curricular standards at most grade levels; and many teachers don't have extensive training in linguistics. In most cases it's not immediately clear to teachers where they can effectively integrate linguistic content into their classes.

This paper provides an overview of how we—a scholar of English education (Michelle) and a linguist (Chris)—worked with two teachers to integrate linguistic content into a 4-week curriculum for students in a 9th-grade English class. We open with a brief overview of the process for finding collaborating teachers and district approval for a curricular intervention. Next, we discuss the major parameters that affected our curriculum development—a county-mandated assessment that covered particular English Language Arts (ELA) concepts as well as teacher feedback on student reception to our introduction of linguistic concepts. Following that appears a description of our closing activity for this unit, "Linguistics and Their Everyday Worlds," and analysis of students' work on this assignment. And we conclude with major questions for the field regarding the best strategies for integrating linguistic material into existing secondary curricula. The paper's primary aim is to illustrate the relevance of many linguistic concepts to existing ELA standards and to demonstrate the value of teacher-scholar collaboration.

2. Finding participating teachers. Kennesaw State University, Michelle and Chris's home institution, offers Ed.S. (Specialists in Education) and Ed.D. (Doctorate in Education) programs. Michelle reached out to the students in one of the Ed.D. courses, all of whom were inservice teachers, asking who might be interested in participating in a research study that would integrate linguistic concepts into their existing curriculum. One of the respondents was the chair of a local high school English department in the metro Atlanta area. The department chair and Michelle met at his school to discuss possibilities. He was interested in finding ways to integrate linguistics into the English department across other classes. He introduced Michelle to a few of the Advanced Placement teachers. However, the one who was most excited to participate in the study was not an Advanced Placement teacher. The participating teacher, who we will name Sarah here, was a novice teacher, only three years out of her undergraduate program.

The participating high school runs on a block schedule, meaning students take four new classes each semester, and each class lasts for approximately 90 minutes. The focus class was comprised of approximately 30 students, 23 of whom returned consent/assent forms. In addition to Sarah, who was the lead teacher, there was also a Special Education teacher, who we will name Marion, who had over ten years of teaching experience and was currently working on her Ed.S.

Sarah and Marion had taught the same group of students the previous semester in a "Read 180" class, a scripted curriculum that the district bought. This curriculum is designed to bring struggling readers onto reading level.

3. Curriculum development.

- 3.1. COUNTY-MANDATED ASSESSMENT. At the end of the unit of study, the students were required to take an assessment created by the district. Each ninth-grade class in the district would take the same assessment at the end of the same unit. The assessment, which was nine pages long and 25 multiple choice questions, was designed to meet the needs of a variety of units across the district; therefore, the assessment covered a significant range of concepts from how to create a works cited; to ethos, pathos, logos; to types of writing (narrative, literary analysis, argumentative, etc.); to tone versus mood.
- 3.2. INITIAL CURRICULUM PLAN. Our initial curriculum plan was to integrate several linguistic concepts, which supported the traditional curricular concepts, within a unit using *The House on Mango Street* (HOMS) by Sandra Cisneros as the anchor text. Each week contained a theme related to community, identity, and the world, as can be seen in Table 1.

Week and Topic	Essential Question	Linguistic/ Sociolinguistic Concepts	ELA-Focused Connected Concepts	Main Activities
Week 1: Defining Community, Identity, and Self HOMS Vignettes	What is the meaning of a word and who gets to decide?	Reference and Semantics Nouns and linking verbs	Keywords (Tone) Simile and Metaphor Ethos	Memes and semantic misunderstanding Where I'm From Poem
Week 2: Community HOMS Vignettes	What are your communities and how do they define you?	Cohesion	Internal conflict Pathos Foreshadowing and Flashback Main argument	Song and/or movie analysis that represents their community Cohesion—Round robin storytelling
Week 3: Identity HOMS Vignettes	How do you situate yourself in your world through language?	Nouns and linking verbs Reference and Semantics Cohesion Code-meshing/ Translanguaging	Irony (types) Logos Theme Point of View	Life maps One piece of Mango Street that's been meaningful to them and why
Week 4: Placing Ourselves in the World(s) Around Us HOMS Vignettes	How do we take control of the definitions of ourselves and our communities?	Revisit and integrate all concepts Code-meshing/ Translanguaging	Revisit and integrate all concepts	Linguistic Analysis What's the most important thing you learned about language during this unit?

Table 1. Overview of initial curriculum

- 3.3. STUDENT RECEPTION AND TEACHER FEEDBACK. Although there were specific checkpoints with the teachers that were integrated into the research study, Michelle and/or Chris were present every day for the curriculum implementation, so they spoke with the teachers daily about the students' uptake of the curriculum and concepts. The teachers, during the first few days of the unit, made it clear that significant changes to the curriculum needed to be made. Some of their specific feedback was as follows:
 - Too much information too quickly
 - A significant number of the participating students received special education services from the district. The speed of our curriculum mirrored that of an advanced placement class. The number one thing Michelle and Chris needed to do was to slow down. The next most significant change was to repeat, often and clearly, the

same information so students had multiple opportunities to process that information.

- The original curriculum centered on teacher-lecture and student group work. Both teachers said that students should be up and moving, working on project-based learning ideas.
- The district provided laptops for each student. It was clear early in the curriculum that students used these laptops to either play games or use as a shield to sleep behind. After the first few days, our curriculum did not integrate any technology to help students stay on task.
- While the curriculum planned for connections between the district assessment and linguistic concepts, the teachers asked for a more specified focus on connecting the linguistic concepts to those found on the district-mandated assessment (e.g., how does the use of dialects relate to a writer's ethos and tone?)
- 3.4. REVISED CURRICULUM. Based off the teachers' feedback, significant changes were made to the curriculum (see Table 2).

Week 1: Introductory linguistic concepts; nouns and the power of naming; how different nouns can shape tone

Week 2: Perspective and language; mood and tone; point of view; semantics; discourse; history of language; dialect variations

Week 3: Discourse; types of irony; ethos, pathos, and logos; translanguaging; language and identity

Week 4: Review; translanguaging

Table 2. Revised curriculum

As can be seen in Table 2, many concepts were removed from the unit, such as cohesion and reference. Furthermore, concepts were repeated more often. For example, in Week 2, perspective was introduced, but it was a thread throughout the rest of the unit, connecting to discourse, language and identity, and translanguaging. Also, as seen in the table, translanguaging was taught in both weeks three and four to ensure students saw the concept enacted in several spaces.

Through these revisions, Michelle and Chris found easy connections between several linguistic and curricular concepts, as demonstrated in Table 3.

Linguistic Concepts	Traditional English Language Arts Concepts
Semantics and Discourse	Mood and Tone
Translanguaging and Discourse	Ethos, Pathos, Logos
Semantics	Figurative Language
Discourse	Types of Irony

Table 3. Linguistic and ELA concept alignments

At the end of the unit, Michelle interviewed the teacher for feedback on the curriculum. Michelle asked the teacher where she saw the curriculum aligning with the linguistic concepts. The teacher saw many similar connections. For example, the teacher specified the connections between the linguistic concepts mentioned above and their connections to types of irony, figurative language, conflict, and the reinforcing of other concepts such as ethos, pathos, logos.

4. Closing activity: "Linguistics and Their Everyday Worlds."

4.1. ACTIVITY AND PROMPTS. For the closing activity of the unit, we wanted students to have an opportunity to make connections between some of the linguistic concepts we taught them in the 4-week curriculum and applications to real-world contexts. One of our observations of this particular class, reinforced by teacher feedback, was that the students were engaging more in the linguistics lessons when they were *doing* rather than just *listening*. We also noted that students' energy and engagement also rose when we had them working together on activities, when they got up out of their desks and moved around the classroom, and when we had them write.

For all of these reasons, we decided to use a learning stations model, which is "fundamentally based on divisions and groupings of both content and students: the session materials are divided into several parts, which are then assigned to different places within the classroom (i.e., stations). As a result, this makes students move from one spot to another (i.e., rotations) in order to progressively work on independent activities connected to certain goals or a common theme" (Morató 2022). Our activity aimed to get students thinking about the overall theme of "linguistics in the real world," encouraging them to make connections between specific linguistic ideas they had been learning about and their own, everyday worlds in the past, present, and future. We devised six different station themes, each with corresponding prompt(s) written on poster paper in different areas of the classroom (see Table 4). To set up the rotations, we divided the class into six groups that would work together and then write about their individual contributions to each station on a handout, according to these instructions:

- There are six stations set up around the room. Your group will work together to answer each question posed at each station.
- Step 1 (7 minutes): You will collaboratively create an answer and write it on the poster board (with all of your names below the answer).
- Step 2 (3 minutes): Then, on your individual document, you will write out what you contributed to the collaborative answer (at least two sentences).
- ***Make sure your answers differ (or at least add onto) the answers other groups have put on the poster. We shouldn't see the same answer several times in a row on the same poster.

The instructions were intended to keep students in a collaborative mode while still reflecting on their individual contributions to each station prompt. Sarah, Chris, and Michelle worked together to keep students on time and on task so that all students could rotate through at last three stations before the end of class.

Some station themes and prompts, such as COMPUTERS and LAWS, were specifically inspired by professional paths such as computational linguistics and forensic linguistics. While we had not discussed these linguistic subfields at any significant length in prior weeks, we were curious to see how well students would be able to recognize the relevance of knowing things about language for certain real-world jobs. Another theme that emerged during our discussions with students in the weeks before this lesson was the role that listeners need to play in making cross-

linguistic communication open-minded and effective—i.e., so that both listeners and speakers equally share in the communicative burden (Lippi-Green 2012).

Station #: STATION THEME	Prompt(s)		
	Just respond to one of the options below. Make sure you specify which option your group chose to answer.		
#1: Computers	Option 1: Why would people who work in computer programming (for example, to create things like Siri or Alexa on your phone or computer) need to understand things about language, dialect, and translanguaging?		
	Option 2: If you were working a job or doing a hobby in social media spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok, why might you need to know things about language, dialect, and translanguaging?		
#2: Laws	Imagine you're a detective. You're trying to solve a case, but the only major evidence you have is an anonymous recording of the culprit's voice and an anonymous piece of their writing. How does knowing about language and dialects help you figure out who committed the crime?		
	• Can you think of other ways that knowing things about language might be helpful for the study, practice, or enforcement of law?		
	Even if you only speak English, how can knowing about		
	(1) language differences,		
#3: TRAVELING ABROAD	(2) the importance of listening carefully, and		
	(3) the importance of effective communication		
	help you when traveling beyond the United States to places where English isn't the first language spoken?		
#4: TEACHING ENGLISH	Based on everything we've learned over the last four weeks, how do you think English should be taught differently in schools? Please explain your answer.		
#5: ENGLISH VARIATIONS IN THE REAL WORLD	If you're going to write for video games, TV shows, songs, or if you're going to write books, why would you need to understand how other people talk?		
#6: VISUAL REPRESENTATION	Draw a picture representing what you've learned (big picture) over the last four weeks. Explain your picture with at least two sentences.		

Table 4. Station themes and prompts

It seemed to us that students could be challenged to explore these ideas at the TRAVELING ABROAD station. The TEACHING ENGLISH station was meant to encourage students to be more metacognitive in reflecting about what it means to learn "English" in an ELA classroom, while ENGLISH VARIATIONS IN THE REAL WORLD nudged them to articulate why linguistic knowledge would be practically useful for creative writing applications. (We were also inspired to add this station because we had overheard at least one student mention they wanted to be a professional songwriter some day.) Lastly, we thought the VISUAL REPRESENTATION station was a valuable way to capture students' reflections on their learning using a non-verbal medium. (And we acknowledge that as linguists we sometimes overemphasize word-based expressions of meaning, so we thought it important to make space for visual expression.)

4.2. SUMMARIES OF STUDENT RESPONSES. Student responses are summarized in the following paragraphs, with selected examples of student responses provided.¹

Students at Station #1: COMPUTERS generally did not engage with Option #1 (the computational linguistics option), except at a general level about the importance of "understanding" and one's ability "to understand the group"—important skills that apply not only to computational linguistics but to any workplace context. Overall, the students were far more interested in discussing and responding to Option #2 (the social media option). One group remarked on language variation as an audience concern for writers and content creators: "In social media platforms language and translanguaging is mostly used commonly by the people. There for creators must understand the users." Another group added that "slang and different varies of english" would be important parts of knowledge for those working in social media. Similarly, a third group noted that global variation in language was pertinent: "With social media, you should know the different ways people speak since it is a worldwide thing." One student also noted that racial differences can sometimes impact cross-cultural communication.

At the LAWS station (#2), most groups made connections between language and idiolect, pointing to specific aspects of language analysis that might be useful for law enforcement. Representative responses included the following: "Hearing the words of their accent and the wway they pronounce words. To reading their writing and spelling" and "Knowing there voice and handwriting can help narrow down who the culprit might be." We also noted some students' comfort using slang in their written responses, such as *the 12* 'the police': "It will be easier for the 12 to catch the suspect of the person thats guilty."

The Traveling Abroad station (#3) demonstrated varied responses. One group stressed the value of English as a global lingua franca ("In every country, people learn english... It's really important to speak english, for explain, if you want a job, it's really important to speak the language!... Its pretty important for understanding and learning english communication"). But another group acknowledged that not all people around the world speak English, and it was important for English speakers to try to communicate with others (though they emphasized visual communication): "Even though other countries don't speak English, our human minds can possibly understand the visual communication of another." Two other groups highlighted the value of paralanguage ("Communication and gestures like facial expressions can help a lot.") and context ("When traveling new placespay attention to deteals because of the surronding for things you want.") in cross-linguistic encounters.

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¹ In the following paragraphs we provide anonymized quotations from student work, representing the students' language as they wrote it. The examples reflect students' spelling and word choices. We do not mark any elements with "[sic]" as we do not wish to measure or judge their language against an implied "standard."

Students at Station #4: TEACHING ENGLISH provided several interesting perspectives about strategies and goals for teaching and learning English. Several groups emphasized the importance of teaching English as a variable and varied concept, including regional variation—e.g., "ENnlish should be taught in variations" and "It should be taught based on where you came from." A third group mentioned several interesting dimensions: "English shouldn't have restrictions. Language history is also key. It'll show the similarities English has w/ others." We interpreted the first part of this comment as a response to our curriculum's discussion of standard English and their desire to learn and work with Englishes beyond the standard. We also recognized the comments on "language history" and language contact ("the similarities English has w/ others") as reflecting elements of our curriculum in which we discussed borrowings in English from French, Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages over many centuries. Lastly, one notable trend across groups was how many made comments about the practical utility of learning about English and a desire that this utility be foregrounded in teaching (e.g., "I think it should be taught in a more useful way in certain situations.").

The most salient word in the poster responses for Station #5: ENGLISH VARIATIONS IN THE REAL WORLD was "understanding." The prompt asked about writing for various media, and all groups focused primarily on audience and other rhetorical concerns. They noted how the writing might need to be varied based on "target audience," "target demographic," "context," "background," "opinion and appeal to there [other people's] opinions," "viewers," and "relatability." Some groups pointed to translanguaging and language variation as writing strategies to meet different audiences' needs, and age was named in one case as a specific variable writers would need to pay attention to.

The final station, #6: VISUAL REPRESENTATION, invited the students to give us graphic or pictorial reflections on their learning during the curriculum. Several students took the opportunity to play again with a visualization technique we had asked them to do in our lessons on semantics—specifically, to map polysemy with common words or slang words, as can be seen in Figure 1.

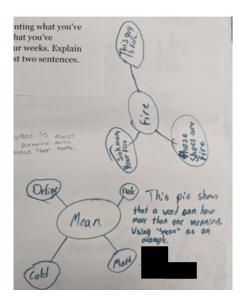


Figure 1. Examples of polysemy and slang-in-context (student names redacted)

In Figure 1, one group of students graphically demonstrates how the word *mean* can mean 'define,' 'rude,' 'math,' and 'cold' by centering *mean* and drawing "spokes" to the related words and meanings. They also provide metacommentary on their drawing: "This pic shows that a word can have more than one meaning. Using 'mean' as an example." They also provided a diagram with a slang word from their vernacular, *fire*, and drew spokes to different contexts in which it can have the meaning 'impressive.'

Figure 2 includes a picture from a different group illustrating language variation in a conversation:



Figure 2. Student drawing representing language variation.

One stick figure says, "Good morning, sir," and the other replies, "Wus gud, fam?" The group adds the following metacommentary: "This demonstrates the difference in ways people speak to each other. Shows slang and age and where people grew up."

This particular illustration captured several themes we aimed to emphasize throughout our curriculum, including comfort with translanguaging and writing using a mix of slang, standard spellings, and/or dialectal spellings. One of the themes of the curriculum, and a consistent takeaway by the students, was embracing the multiplicity of the English language. Schools tend to focus on "standardized English only" in English language arts classes. However, using a linguistic lens to explore the many ways English manifests in a variety of contexts, even the many ways one student may use English, opened students' understandings of the possibilities. These possibilities involve not only their own language uses, but the connections between their Englishes and others' Englishes.

- 4.3. REFLECTIONS ON CLOSING ACTIVITY. The following list reflects some of our primary takeaways from having completed this closing stations activity with our students:
 - It is interesting that more than one student brought up language variation as a consideration at every station, even for those stations in which our prompts did *not* specifically

ask about it (e.g., Stations #4, #5, and #6). Occasionally students named particular dimensions of variation, such as race, age, and region. We feel that this is evidence that our lessons on dialects, language change, and translanguaging did "stick" to some extent, and that at least some students were acknowledging the fact and relevance of language change and variation in multiple real-world contexts. (Even so, we are also mindful that Stations #1, #2, and #3 asked about language variation and difference explicitly, so those topics were likely already salient for any students rotating from those stations to #4, #5, and #6.)

- Many groups showed facility writing with and about several linguistic concepts we discussed with them, including *slang*, *accent*, *dialect*, and *translanguaging*. They also brought up the relevance of topics such as historical linguistics and language contact, which we had threaded through several of their lessons.
- If we want to see better student engagement with the computational linguistics prompt, it should be separated into its own station, distinct from the social media prompt. It is not surprising that students preferred that option since they generally have much more experience outside the classroom in social media spaces. But their preferences also revealed that we could perhaps spend more time in the curriculum teaching connections and applications to computational linguistics—e.g., asking students to think about how Alexa, Siri, and other voice recognition systems are able to recognize different dialects of English around the world, how those systems handle hearing slang or neologisms, and so on.
- Students regularly made comments pointing to their excitement and interest in learning about language in English classes, particularly when the material was practically relevant to their lives and future plans.

5. Conclusion: Some questions for linguists collaborating with teachers. Our experience working with teachers to present a linguistics curriculum for a ninth-grade English Language Arts class was challenging and illuminating. We learned the importance of a real collaboration when working with teachers in classrooms; that is, it is important to put the teachers, the students, and their curriculum at the center of the study rather than the linguistic concepts. The linguistic content becomes truly integrative when we listen to the needs of the stakeholders in classrooms. Also, as a former secondary English teacher, Michelle was reminded of the fluid nature of teaching in a high school classroom. In colleges, we are able to plan out an entire semester and typically, more or less, keep to the schedule. But this is not how secondary classrooms work. The environment of secondary classrooms differs from college classrooms in many ways, such as surprise changes to the schedule due to any number of reasons like a fire drill, and differences in student uptake of concepts. Flexibility is a hallmark of any work with secondary students, teachers, and curricula.

Our work with teachers also left us with important questions that we need to think more about, and that we think all linguists need to continue thinking about. So we conclude this article by leaving readers with the following questions to ponder:

- Do we need to explicitly name linguistic concepts for K-12 students?
- What are the benefits versus disadvantages of using linguistic jargon with students?
- How many concepts are too many to introduce to students in any one lesson?
- Which concepts are the most relevant, important, and/or useful for students to learn?
- Do we have to use linguist-specific practices, such as IPA transcriptions, when discussing phonology? Or are there advantages to not using these tools in K12 classrooms?

• How do teachers balance using linguistics to support *knowledge for the test* versus *learning goals beyond the test*?

It is true that modern K12 spaces heavily revolve around standardized tests, and with time these standardized tests become more consequential for the teachers, students, and schools. Therefore, as linguists continue to think of how to integrate linguistic concepts into K12 classrooms, considerations of the standardized tests and the realities associated with those tests must be part of the conversation. Furthermore, linguists must begin working closely with teachers and other K12 stakeholders to learn about the realities of K12 spaces. Through these collaborations, linguists can learn which linguistic concepts can best help schools reach the goals they are required to meet.

Learning how to best integrate linguistic concepts into K12 curricula has larger implications than students learning about the multiplicity of the English language. Throughout our research in a variety of spaces, including the study that is the focus of this paper, we have found that students' empathy grows when they learn about linguistics (e.g., Devereaux et al. 2021). Students begin to understand that all varieties of English have value, and that value is translated to the people who speak those varieties. While we believe it is important that students learn the skills to be successful in the K12 classroom and the standardized test, we think that an increase in empathy and understanding has implications far beyond the classroom and can help students become more empathetic members of the worlds in which we all live.

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